Ottoman print culture

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The fifth issue of *Lingua Franca: The History of the Book in Translation* presents a selection of four articles on the history of manuscripts and printed books in the Ottoman Empire. It should be stated for readers who are not familiar with the Ottoman cultural field that the selection of articles reflects only the history of books written in the official language of the empire, Turkish, in Arabic script. However it must be noted that until the establishment of the Turkish republic in 1920, Ottoman book culture reflected the multi-religious and multi-ethnic identity of the empire, with books circulating in Arabic, Farsi, Armenian, Greek, Kurdish, and Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), as well as Turkish: local printers worked with Arabic, Armenian, Greek and Hebrew type. While the official palace language was Turkish written in Arabic script, it was not uncommon for prominent figures from minority communities to write in Turkish using their own Armenian or Greek alphabet for subjects other than religion.

Canonical discourse on the history of printing in the Ottoman Empire argues that print technology arrived in the Ottoman region very late, indicating the Ottomans' "belatedness" compared to European empires. However, the major shortcoming of this discourse is that historians focused solely on the Muslim community and the imperial elite but did not take into consideration what was going on among minority communities. Print technology in fact arrived in Ottoman territory towards the end of the fifteenth century, right after its invention in Europe: it was in use by the Judaeo-Spanish community as early as 1493 and by the Armenian community in 1567. The Greek community founded the first printing house in 1627. Non-Muslim communities only printed religious books for teaching purposes.

It is true that the dominant community of the empire and the palace seemed to ignore the new technology until 1727, almost three hundred years after its uptake in Europe. Two main reasons account for the attitude of the Ottoman palace. The first was the low demand for books in general. Ottoman society had a strong oral and verbal culture, meaning books were not a necessity for learning or transmitting information. The model of education in madrasahs[1] was based on lectures by a professor. One basic function of printing – making books available for a wide readership – was therefore simply not valid for much of Ottoman society. The second reason was, as Rifaat Ali Abou-el-Haj indicated in his book on the Ottoman Empire,[2], that the Ottomans were selective in their uptake of technology, strategically adopting those which would be of benefit. Not until the nineteenth century did Ottoman Muslims feel the need for printing technology or widespread access to printed books.

In 1727, the Ottoman courtier Ibrahim Müteferrika established the first Turkish-Muslim printing house with the support of the Sultan Ahmed III. However, the venture proved a failure, printing just seventeen books, all educational in character. As stated in Orlin Sabev's major work, *İbrahim Müteferrika ya da İlk Osmanlı Matbaa Serüveni*[3], on this first Ottoman printing press and its founder, the main reason for this failure was the project's cost. Although the venture was supported directly by the palace, the cost of paper was too high as it had to be imported. As a result, even though the customers were high-ranking courtiers, military officers and the like, the books were beyond their budgets. The second reason was that even if customers had been able to afford the books, they did not find the printed page visually appealing. The plainly printed books, devoid of ornamentation, did not fit the image of what a book should look like for the Ottoman elites.

The latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed a breakthrough in terms of Ottoman print culture. It is no coincidence that the blossoming of print culture overlapped with the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II. Abdülhamid II, a highly controversial figure in Ottoman history, was the first Ottoman ruler to imagine a new type of nation and make an attempt at nation-building. The key reference here is Benedict Anderson's groundbreaking, paradigm-shifting study, *Imagined Communities*,[4]and its claim that print capitalism and the novel as a literary genre were two basic means of nation-building. Another nineteenth-century tool for creating a homogeneous society was education. The second volume of Theodore Zeldin's *France 1848–1945*[5] defines the nineteenth century as an age of education. Zeldin argues that empires across the world, including France, Germany, England, Japan, and China, started standardizing public education and extending it to wider sections of society. The Ottoman empire was no exception. For Sultan Abdülhamid II, the road map was education and the vehicle was printed textbooks. To this end, he established schools throughout the country at every level. Primary schools, secondary schools, and schools for vocational education were all included to the program. A total of ten thousand new state schools were established during his reign. There were also private schools serving individual communities and missionary schools. Given the very limited numbers of schools before the Hamidian period, this was a huge initiative. According to Akşin Somel and Benjamin Fortna[6], Sultan Abdülhamid II used all the means of the state to open new schools across the Empire and to provide them with teachers and teaching materials. He also modernized teaching methods, though curricula remained conservative. Creating a homogeneous society meant using the same teaching material in all schools, which was only possible with state-controlled printed textbooks. As Brinkley Messick states in *The Calligraphic State*,[7]Abdülhamid II was mesmerized by the idea of printing technology. Printing became a profitable and prestigious profession. Many private printing companies were founded at this time, some with direct support from the palace, such as those of Ahmet İhsan and Ebüzziya Tevfik.

One small note on Sultan Abdülhamid II: he was not only a big supporter of the printing press but a keen reader of detective novels. In their article, "II. Abdülhamid'in Polisiye Roman Merakı ve Çevirttiği Polisiye Romanlar"[8] (Abdülhamid II's Enthusiasm for Detective Novels and the Detective Novels Translated for Him), Erol Üyepazarcı and Raşit Çavaş studied the index catalogs of his private library and calculated that Sultan Abdülhamid II had almost 505 titles translated into Turkish, mostly by a group of translators hired to work in the palace itself. His enthusiasm for detective fiction, especially Sherlock Homes, was so strong that there were rumors about him meeting Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Sultan Abdülhamid even became the protagonist of a detective novel, *Abdülhamit ve*

Sherlock Holmes, by Yervant Odyan, published in 1912. The novel was highly scathing of Abdülhamid II, perfectly reflecting the political atmosphere of the 1910s. It has frequently been speculated that the sultan's love for detective novels was both the reason for and result of his paranoia.

Four articles originally published in Turkish have been selected for this issue of *Lingua Franca: The History of the Book in Translation* to reflect various characteristics of Ottoman book culture. Christoph Neumann focuses on the relation between readers and books in early modern Ottoman manuscript culture, arguing that the book as an object was attributed a degree of symbolic value which defined the reader's attitude towards it. A number of canonical works were considered a must for an intellectual's library or a prestigious gift for a senior officer. In turn, Tülün Değirmenci presents the experiences of more ordinary readers. Drawing on reader's notes jotted in the margins of a group of manuscripts, she teases out how books were read and circulated in Ottoman society. İsmail Erünsal draws our attention to books as commercial objects. His article focuses on the transition period from manuscripts to printed books and shows that there was a strict division between their trade, although to the modern mind, they were all simply books. Özgür Türesay's article is about a prominent figure in Ottoman print culture. Türesay's article not only gives a brief panorama of the rich Ottoman print culture of the late nineteenth century but also studies its social and political ramifications: as stated in Türesay's article, although Sultan Abdülhamid II was pro-print culture, he also applied a strict regime of censorship against printing companies and newspaper owners.

The locations in İsmail Erünsal's article can be identified in the maps below. The first map is a broad view of Constantinople dating from 1922. The second map dates from 1922. On the left, the small triangle-like establishment next to Bayezıd Mosque is Sahaflar Çarşısı (Book Market). In the middle, the short snake-like street is Bab-ı Ali (Sublime Porte) Street, the heart of the printing press and media in the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey. The street name has today been changed to Cağaloğlu, as Bab-ı Ali (Sublime Porte) was a direct reference to the Ottoman reign. Cağaloğlu street still houses newspapers and printing houses.

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Details of first publication for each article:

Tülün Değirmenci, "Bir Kitabı Kaç Kişi Okur? Osmanlı'da Okurlar ve Okuma Biçimleri Üzerine Bazı Gözlemler", *Tarih ve Toplum: Yeni Yaklaşımlar*, 13 (Güz 2011): 7-43.

Ismaël Erünsal,"Tarihî Gelişim: İstanbul'da ve İmparatorluğun Diğer Bölgelerinde Kitap Ticareti ve Sahaflar", in *Osmanlılarda Sahaflık ve Sahaflar*. İstanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2013:
81-91.

Christoph Neumann, "Üç tarz-ı mütalaa: Yeniçağ Osmanlı Dünyası'nda kitap okumak ve yazmak", *Tarih ve Toplum*, no. 1, Spring 2005: 51-76.

Özgür Türesay, “Bir Osmanlı Matbaacısının Sergüzeşti: Ebüzziya Tevfik’in Matbaa-i Ebüzziya’sı”, *Toplumsal Tarih*, Sayı 128, August 2004: 36-43.

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[1] Terms marked with an asterisk are defined in the glossary.

[2] Rifaat Ali Abou-el-Haj, *The Formation of the Modern State: The Ottoman Empire, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1991, pp. 73-92.

[3] Sabev, Orlin. *İbrahim Müteferrika ya da İlk Osmanlı Matbaa Serüveni 1726 -1746: Yeniden Değerlendirme* [İbrahim Müteferrika or Adventure of the First Ottoman Printing Press 1726 -1746: Revisited]. İstanbul: Yeditepe Yayınevi, 2006: 140-162. See also ibid., *Waiting for Müteferrika: Glimpses of Ottoman Print Culture*. Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2018.

[4] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised reprint. London, New York: Verso, 1991.

[5] Zeldin, Theodore. *France 1848–1945: Volume Two: Intellect, Taste and Anxiety*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1977: 139-205.

[6] Somel, Selçuk A. *The Modernization of Public Education in the Ottoman Empire, 1839-1908: Islamization, Autocracy and Discipline*. Leiden: Brill, 2001; Fortna, Benjamin C. *Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

[7] Messick, Brinkley. *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

[8] Üyepazarcı, Erol and Raşit Çavaş. “II. Abdülhamid’in Polisiye Roman Merakı ve Çevirttiği Polisiye Romanlar” [Abdülhamid II’s Enthusiasm for Detective Novels and the Detective Novels Translated for Him], *Müteferrika*, Winter 2002, no. 22: 97-116.

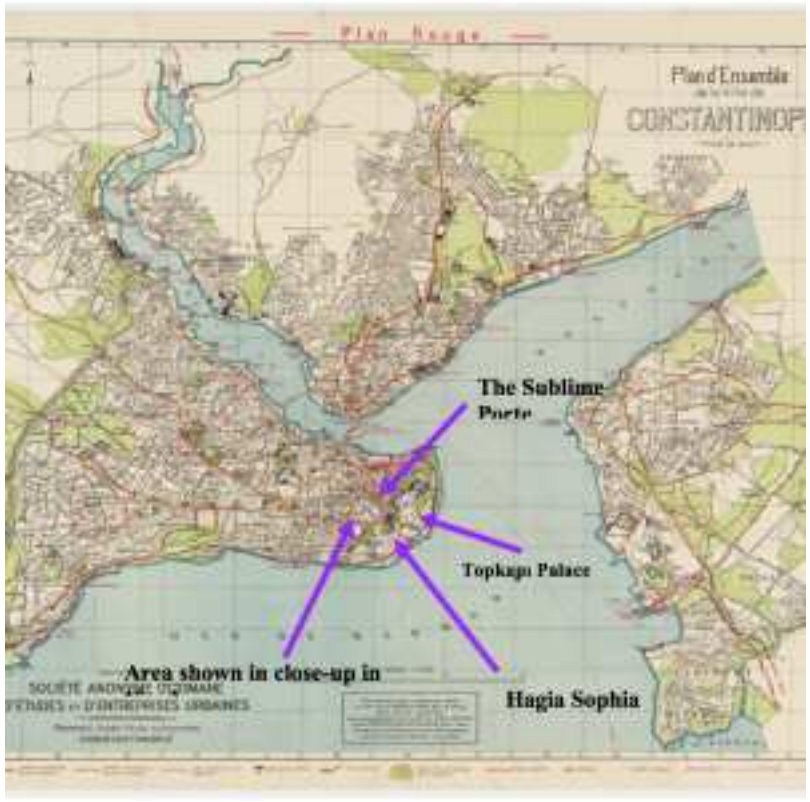

Fig. 1. View of Constantinople, 1922. Plan général de la ville de Constantinople, Société Anonyme Ottomane d'Etudes et d'Entreprises Urbaines, 1922. Courtesy of the Harvard Map Collection, Harvard University. The original map can be viewed here: https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/ids:15497126

Fig. 2 A close-up view of quadrants J6-K7 from the 1922 map showing the location of Sahaflar Çarşısı and Bab-ı Ali Street. The original map can be viewed here: https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/ids:15497126